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Students who speak in a jargon related to, but different from, Standard American English and students who know a single or limited word meaning but are unable to translate that word into a new subject area content both need reading instruction as though Standard American English were their second language. All content area teachers must teach vocabulary, content, and reading skills in the language of their subject matter. The San Diego City Schools program for junior high school atypical readers described as severely handicapped, handicapped, and disabled is discussed as a good example of a reading program with total staff involvement. (CM)

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Reading As A Second Language

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Reading As A Second Language

"You mean we should treat the culturally different child as though Standard American English were his second language?" asks the incredulous teacher.

Why not? Standard American English is certainly not the language he thinks in. His sentence pattern is frequently ungrammatical; his vocabulary, while rich in earthy expletives is meager in multiple-meanings of words that occur in the social studies, science, math, and literature texts. His native jargon is related to Standard American modern English in much the same way that Olde English is related to modern English. He can read "How to Keep your Cool" in a recent issue of Scope faster and with greater understanding than he can read Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

The jargon some students use has value for them. How ironic to punish these students as though they were native speakers of Standard American English and were deliberately rejecting it! Mr. Barringer, for example, in Up the Down Staircase was needlessly punitive in criticising the grammatical construction without responding to the message of a love note. And in Kohl's little book Teaching the "Unteachable" the children were encouraged to write in their own way about things that they knew from experience. For example:

THE JUNKIES

When they are
in the street
they pass it
along to each
other but when
they see the
police they would
run some would
just stand still
and be beat
so pity ful
that they want
to cry
-- Mary, age 11[1]

Their writings were poignant and powerful. But as one tradition-bound teacher pointed out, they:

> . . . couldn't possibly know what junkies were, and, moreover, the other children wouldn't be interested in such a poem. There weren't any rhymes or clearly discernible meter. The word "pityful" was split up incorrectly, "be beat" wasn't proper English and, finally, it wasn't really poetry but just the ramblings of a disturbed girl.[2]

The Maori children are another minority group with experience and language dialects different from the middle class orientation of the basal readers. Sylvia Ashton-Warner in Teacher gives a fascinating account of how one teacher taught these children to read. The words these children wanted to learn were such words as drunk, stabbed, and dead. The stories they wrote they could read and identify with. They could not identify with the scrubbed and law-abiding family of the typical basal reader.

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1. Herbert R. Kohl, Teaching the "Unteachables" (New York, New York: The New York Review, 1967) p. 11.
2. Kohl, loc cit.

But it is not just the jargon of the student which acts as a barrier to him in learning to read. There is another barrier, and one that we unintentionally impose by assuming that when students pronounce a word correctly they are also thinking of the appropriate meaning of the word. Multiple-meaning words such as dense, and bar, and legend can be confusing. The student who thinks the "dense" population of Los Angeles means that a lot of dumb people live there is in trouble. "Bar" means candy to a middle class student and a place to drink to a lower class student. Neither of these meanings is appropriate to the bar graph referred to in the math book; nor would they be appropriate in the literature class in the reading of Tennyson's Crossing of the Bar. The student who knows a "legend" as an account of a wonderful event handed down through the ages will be puzzled to find "legend" written on the map as a key to the symbols.

To know words and yet not to know them is a typical frustration. The teacher is frustrated because when the child pronounces a word correctly, she assumes he understands the word in the frame of reference of her discipline. The student is frustrated because he feels that he knows the meaning of the word but the sentence just doesn't make sense. He's been betrayed by words.

Multiple meanings of words and particularly words in the context of a specialized subject are like a new language to the student. If we ask him what a measure is, and then say, "Speak to me in math," we want him to tell us that a measure is a standard unit such as an inch, yard, or

or bushel; or that it refers to a divisor that leaves no remainder. But "measure" as a musical notation is a different concept. At various times in the school day different teachers are asking the student to "speak to me in music, speak to me in science, speak to me in industrial arts."

Consequently, special subject teachers, ready or not, will need to accept the challenge of first of all listening to the students, and secondly, of teaching students to "speak" and read in the language of their subject. Concepts and vocabulary must be developed within the subjects where they are needed. The general English teacher cannot teach all of the reading skills that are needed in math, or science, or social studies. Nor is the special reading teacher customarily trained to teach the concepts and vocabulary for all of the subjects included in the junior high curriculum.

Interestingly enough, for thirty years back we can find references in the literature which indicate that every secondary teacher should be a teacher of reading. If in the past thirty years we have not assumed this responsibility, why should we assume it now?

Some things have changed. Teachers who used to say "but I can't find references on the Near East written at the third grade level," now can find them. Government Compensatory Education funds make reference libraries available in the schools least likely to be able to afford them.

Teachers have changed, too. There are fewer teachers who know everything about Shakespeare and nothing about the teaching of reading.

In California, for example, all English majors are required to take at least one basic course in the teaching of reading. Of course, some teachers will still muddle through or even totally ignore the reading skills students need to learn. But, at least, those teachers have been exposed to techniques that could make them successful teachers of reading. They will have knowledge of the cloze procedure, paragraph geometry, SQ3R, EVOKER, skimming, scanning, and similar aids to effective reading.

More and more junior high schools are developing reading programs varied and flexible enough to meet all of the reading needs of their students. San Diego[3] is a good example of a city moving into a reading program with total staff involvement. In addition to the usual two tracks for students of low and high achievement, the program provides for three atypical and frequently ignored groups.

All three of these atypical groups are made up of students with such inadequate reading skills that they cannot profit from attending regular subject-oriented classes. The group labeled Severely Handicapped requires clinical type instruction by the reading teacher on a one-to-one basis. These are the children formerly relegated to junior high limbo. They are assessed as having the potential but lacking in the instruction to enable them to read. Alfred is an example of this. He comes from a home where the unwed mother has raised several children. The children attended school sporatically. Alfred tests in the 70's on the verbal section of the WISC, but scores 115 on the performance section. He can get a part-time job on Saturdays if he can learn to read the labels on

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3. Information available through the San Diego City Schools Guide for the Diagnosis and Correction of Reading Disabilities (Junior High School) 1967.

the cans of corn, beans, and whatever the cook requests. He learns most effectively by the Fernald method. The guidance and health personnel assist in these severely handicapped cases. Alfred was also referred to a college clinic to supplement the work of the school. The nurse and visiting teacher worked closely with the home to increase the sanitation and nutrition for Alfred.

The second group identified in the San Diego schools is made up of Handicapped Readers. These students are generally reading four grades below their expectancy level and, therefore, they cannot function in the regular subject-oriented classes. There are too many of these students to give them the same individualized treatment given to the first group. In planning what to do with these students, the content teachers were consulted. "Can you teach reading in your social studies classes, science classes, and math classes to children with third and fourth grade reading ability?" they were asked. "No," they said. "Not even if we help you find materials?" This time the no was less firm, and after weeks of demonstrations and in-service meetings, the content teachers agreed to try.

These teachers were told to "break the failure pattern." This meant that math teachers were bringing third grade math books to class. English teachers were preparing phrase cards and asking students to apply syllabication generalizations to non-words such as al/fy. According to the plan, students in this group spend three periods a day learning to read. They are taught to read through a modified English, social studies, science and arithmetic problem-solving program. These classes are limited in size to ten or fifteen students. The school system refers to

this plan as its Total Immersion program.

The third group in the San Diego schools, is called Disabled Readers. Students in this group are about two years below their reading expectancy age. They have enough reading skill to attend the regularly scheduled classes. In addition they are programmed into the reading laboratory in groups of eight or less. The reading instructor helps them to work on their own specific needs. This is an exciting high potential group.

Summary Our concept of reading as a foreign language refers to a two-pronged problem. First, there are the students who speak in a related but different language than Standard American English; and there are students who know a single or limited word meaning and who are baffled by being unable to translate that word into a new subject area context. Neither of these problems can be completely handled in special reading classes nor in the general English program. So in answer to the original question, "Are reading skills best taught in special reading classes or in the general English Program," we reply that it is best taught in both places depending upon the needs of the students. But, we quickly add, reading must also be taught by ALL content teachers.